

Help! I Need Somebody (to Understand Why Toxic Gender Dynamics Aren't Funny):

Rape Culture and Toxic Masculinity in Shakespearean "Comedies"

Times change. That has rung true for centuries, through revolutions, renaissances, and riots alike. Paradoxically, another proclamation has cemented itself into the granite of time: history repeats itself. This, too, is true, as humanity finds itself fighting the same battles time and again. The coexistence of these two phrases is a quandary. How can everything change, yet still stay the same? This question can be applied directly to how deeply embedded Shakespeare's plays are in rape culture and toxic masculinity. Though these two concepts have been around for nearly as long as civilization itself, only recently have they been given names. It is a struggle for some to acknowledge that these beloved works of literature are incredibly problematic when it comes to toxic cultural ideas, yet this acknowledgement is imperative to performing the plays as they should be in modern society. Nowhere is this clearer than in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Measure for Measure*, two Shakespearean comedies that thrive on rape culture and toxic masculinity.

Before delving into these two plays, though, there are two definitions that must be understood. "Rape culture" and "toxic masculinity" can be tricky topics to give a definitive definition to. However, there are similarities in every explanation found. Marshall University, in cooperation with the American Psychological Association, condenses rape culture well. According to their Women's Center, rape culture is "an environment in which rape is prevalent and in which sexual violence against women is normalized and excused in the media and popular culture. [It] is perpetuated through the use of misogynistic language, the objectification of women's bodies, and the glamorization of sexual violence, thereby creating a society that disregards women's rights and safety." More specific examples of rape culture and its perpetuation are "blaming the victim; trivializing sexual assault; publicly scrutinizing a victim;...defining 'manhood' as dominant and... 'womanhood' as submissive; refusing to take rape accusations seriously;...[and] teaching women to avoid getting raped instead of teaching men not to rape" (Marshall University). Clearly, all of these factors were prevalent in seventeenth century England:

Shakespeare's upbringing would have normalized each microaggression and violent attack. Similarly, toxic masculinity would have been seen as just its latter word. In the present day, according to *The New York Times* and the American Psychological Association, toxic masculinity is "what can come of teaching boys that they can't express emotion openly; that they have to be 'tough all the time'; that anything other than that makes them 'feminine' or weak." Typically, this comes in the form of "suppressing emotions or masking distress; maintaining an appearance of hardness; [and] violence as an indicator of power" (Salam). How often does a reader see this style of behavior in Shakespeare's plays? Theseus and Demetrius of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and Angelo and the Duke of *Measure for Measure* are but four examples. The majority of the Shakespearean male canon fit directly into this toxic mold.

Shakespeare's characters would have been drawn from the world surrounding the playwright, of course. Elizabethan society was not kind to women, especially women who threatened to or did hold public power. According to author Phyllis Rackin, "In Shakespeare's world, inequalities between men and women were taken for granted. Sanctioned by law and religion and reinforced by the duties and customs of daily life, they were deeply embedded in the fabric of culture" (Rackin 27). Men—whether they possessed power or not—utilized theology and history to promote the submission of women throughout the Elizabethan era. Many were disgusted by Queen Elizabeth I ascending the throne; a woman in power was a threat, something sacrilegious, fearful. John Knox himself "argued that any authority held by a woman above a man was a monstrous usurpation, forbidden by God, repellent to nature, and condemned by ancient authorities" (29-30). Females could not hold power over a man without being considered unholy. She who was powerful was a she-devil, a seductress, a witch; she who was powerful coerced men to be beneath her, a pattern seen in many a Shakespearean work (think *Macbeth* or *Richard III*, for example). Even in the comedies, this thought process reigns supreme: Hermia cannot overrule her father and marry Lysander, for example, and Isabella's word is not trusted until the Duke commands it so. Any attempt at gender usurpation is dashed to the ground immediately.

This was expected of Elizabethan civilization. As Allyna E. Ward observes, "Women...were expected to accept their culturally inferior place in society..." (Ward 19). Queen Elizabeth I battled this

misogynistic thought throughout her reign, warring with those who found her sex to be disconcerting; the antiquated idea then trickled down through the social hierarchy. The submission of women was, without a doubt, accepted as inalienable truth. There was only one sphere in which the Elizabethan populace acknowledged a woman's power: domestic. As Ward states, "It was...recognized that women played important roles in cultivating appropriate behavior for future magistrates and leaders in English society" (36). This directly applies to child-rearing, yes, but domesticity and cultivation spread, also, to intimate relationships and marriage. A woman was expected to be virginal, dignified, innocent, elegant, intelligent but not overly so. Their sexuality was not supposed to exist. Because of this belief, whenever a sexual assault was committed, the woman was blamed with far more immediacy than the man. She was thought to have used coercion, witchery, or devilry in her quest to seduce innocent men, regardless of age, social status, or previous relationship. Again, this is commonly seen in Shakespeare's plays, most notably *Measure for Measure*: it is Isabella who is accused of attempting to ruin a dignified man; the crowd never questions Angelo until the Duke himself decrees it.

As is clearly seen in history books, Shakespeare was enveloped in toxic masculinity and rape culture from a young age. His world was the dominion of men, women the currency and prizes to be won. It is unsurprising, then, that his work is deeply—almost intrinsically—involved with this toxicity. His comedies, especially, utilize rape culture and toxic masculinity to create supposedly laughable gender dynamics. This phenomenon—the use of feminine sexuality and male domination in comedy—was becoming increasingly common during Shakespeare's time. After the Reformation, limits on sexuality in plays became laxer. Sexual references and sexual desires could be a bit more explicit, as Mary Beth Rose observes in her book, *The Expense of Spirit: Moral Conceptions of Sexual Love in Elizabethan Comedy*. Both women and men were allowed to communicate their more intimate wants. However, this did not, in any way, bring about equality. Rose states that "while celibacy no longer flourished as an idealized mode of behavior after the Reformation, the distrust of sexual desire and the ideals of maidenly virtue-virginity-and wifely chastity continued to preoccupy the Renaissance imagination of the moral and spiritual life well into the seventeenth century" (Rose 17). In other words, celibacy was no longer seen as being

required of the man, but of the woman? Chastity was still her only worth. Elizabethan society still saw “female entrance into the sexual world, whether through body or mind, by choice or unwittingly, whether by reciprocating male affections or merely remaining the passive object of them [as] sin” (18). Double standards provided by rape culture remained dominant during Shakespeare’s era, despite the relaxation on male celibacy after the Reformation. Though this may have “arose originally from the economic need to legitimize property for the purposes of inheritance” (17), sexuality as depicted in Shakespeare’s time defined “property” as a less literal thing: woman became property.

This idea, of woman as object, is seen immediately in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Within the first sixteen lines, Theseus reveals how he has come to marry Hippolyta, an Amazon: “Hippolyta, I wooed thee with my sword/And won thy love doing thee injuries;/But I will wed thee in another key,/With pomp, with triumph, and with reveling” (*Midsummer...*; 1.1, 16-19). It is clear that Theseus is referencing a literal battle in which he “won” Hippolyta; it appears as if she was taken prisoner, bounty from a war won. From the beginning, scholar Jillian Keenan notes, “*A Midsummer Night’s Dream* provokes questions about sexual consent. Does Hippolyta sincerely consent to marry Theseus, or was she kidnapped and coerced?” (Keenan 13). It is a debacle that does not shine well on the play: Shakespeare gives his audience rape culture and toxic masculinity at its finest. Theseus has, in the most literal of terms, dominated Hippolyta, as he has won a physical battle against her people and took her as his prize. This instantly objectifies Hippolyta, who receives very few lines throughout the remainder of the play. Considering the mythological Amazon queens were written as outspoken, fierce, and proud, this is a striking detail. Theseus has muted the opinionated woman, and tamed what, in myth, is untamable. He has made her submissive: whether purely by past violence or any version of love, one cannot really say. What is clear is that this marriage likely wasn’t consensual, and that Hippolyta was either forced or coerced. As Krystyna Kujawinska Courtney observes in her essay, “Shakespeare’s Representations of Rape,” Theseus is allowed “to announce that it is possible ‘to transform something like rape into something like a legitimate marriage’” (Courtney 95). While an audience is unsure of what “won thy love doing thee injuries” is referencing specifically, it is highly likely that sexual assault was involved.

After all, rape and the taking of an enemies' women was considered the ultimate victory in a war. It was the way to fully claim the enemies' power, as "the raped and silenced female body...[served] as an object in transactions between men" (92). Hippolyta has become nothing more than a prize, evidenced by her constant presence by Theseus, her silence, and her occasional wistful remembrances of hunts and wars past. She was once a proud, powerful woman; now, though she has moments where her power attempts to shine through, her light has been largely snuffed out. She has become the submissive to Theseus's dominant, thus creating the perfect storm of rape culture.

Theseus is not the only problematic character in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, though. The most famous, perhaps, is Demetrius: his exchange with Helena is one that has sparked intense debate throughout time. Upon realizing that Helena (a woman he has wooed and deceived in the past) is following him in his chasing of Hermia, he tells her:

You do impeach your modesty too much
 To leave the city and commit yourself
 Into the hands of one that loves you not,
 To trust the opportunity of night
 And the ill counsel of a desert place
 With the rich worth of your virginity.

(*Midsummer...*; 2.1, 214-219)

There is a threat of the most literal variety here. Demetrius, with his mention of "the rich worth of [Helena's] virginity," is referencing the very real danger of rape. Though he never specifies that it is himself who will rape Helena, the inference is easily made. These lines are some of the most obvious in *Midsummer* (and in Shakespeare's plays, in general) that directly reference rape culture and toxic masculinity. Demetrius takes it for granted that he will dominate Helena, both physically and in argument. He knows he will win in this unequal dynamic; that assuredness, and that physical threat, fit perfectly into the toxicity's definition. The woman—in this case, Helena—is going to be forced into submission.

There is scholarly debate on this exchange, though, emerging from Helena's previous lines to Demetrius. She tells him,

I am your spaniel, and, Demetrius,
 The more you beat me I will fawn on you.
 Use me but as your spaniel: spurn me, strike me,
 Neglect me, lose me—only give me leave,
 Unworthy as I am, to follow you.

(Midsummer...; 2.1, 202-207)

This is a difficult speech to decipher. Countless interpretations have been presented to explain Helena's odd proclamation of her willingness to take pain from Demetrius. Some of academia have mentioned the faeries' forest backdrop as a reason; Jillian Keenan offers up that Helena may be an early representation of a sadomasochistic fetishist. Both certainly have believable merit in their arguments. However, in Shakespeare's time, one doubts that either of these explanations came to mind. Instead, it is the woman's supposedly inherent submission that is brought center stage. Sick on love, and understanding that her own intellect and desires cannot outshine Demetrius's, Helena reverts to a submissive, inferior state, acknowledging that she will take on a possible assault as her own lack of judgement, and take it gladly. She is showing her Elizabethan audience that Demetrius is her superior; she will do anything for him, as a woman should.

Outside of these archetypes of toxic masculinity, there is one huge generality in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* that connects it, intrinsically, to rape culture. As many will know, Elizabethan ideas about faeries are rather different from those of the twenty-first century. As Lorna Hutson notes in "The Shakespearean unscene: Sexual phantasies in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*," "the invocation of fairy agency ('being taken with the fairies') was, in popular culture, a recognised way of veiling the human shame, the inadmissible human narratives behind traumatized signs of sexual violence, abandoned infants and illegitimate births..." (Hutson 181). Whenever something traumatic happened—viewed as shameful for the female counterpart—the woman was said to be "taken with the fairies," explaining away her

mental breakdowns and posing that she had disappeared from society. Since *Midsummer* revolves around faerie magic, it appears as if the entire work is a reference to sexual violence and assault. This is a facet unclear to contemporary audiences, as most are unfamiliar with Elizabethan folklore, but is important to note, nonetheless. Shakespeare would have heard these stories growing up; it is unlikely that he would unintentionally utilize their meaning.

There is another Shakespearean “comedy” (now categorized as a problem play) that has everything to do with sexual violence and toxic culture: *Measure for Measure*. Arguably, this play is Shakespeare’s most obvious when it comes to rape culture, as the plot revolves around a pious woman threatened with rape by a high-ranking man, who insists (and is correct in) that no one will believe her. Both unquestioned and considered humorous at the original performance date, this play is now hardly performed, largely due to the subject matter offending and horrifying contemporary audiences. *Measure for Measure* is a full-scale representation of the harm done by rape culture and toxic masculinity, making it a difficult play to produce today.

As stated by Courtney, Elizabethan England was “based on male dominance,” so sexual assaults would either “start political antagonisms or intensify homosocial solidarity” (Courtney 92). In the case of *Measure for Measure*, though both could technically be considered true, the latter has the stronger presence. As observed by Professor Helen Morales, when Isabella confronts Angelo in front of the Duke and the crowd, he “undermines her speech by painting her as mad and unstable: ‘Her wits ... are not firm ... And she will speak most bitterly and strange’” (Morales). The crowd—largely composed of men—eagerly follows suit in taunting Isabella; even Lucio, the fantastic who has aided her path the entire play, and Escalus, the true moral Lord of the court, join in the denials. They leap to support their fellow man, regardless of their prior feelings towards him. In the men’s view, Angelo is undeniably in the right. Isabella is merely an inferior, jealous, promiscuous woman attempting to bring him down. Their defense sprouts from the aforementioned “homosocial solidarity,” a thing exacerbated by toxic masculinity.

This is not the first time *Measure for Measure* allows rape culture to reign. Far from it. The issue arises much earlier, upon Isabella's second visit to Angelo to plead for her brother's life. He tells her that he will spare her brother, if she

Be that you are,

That is, a woman; if you be more, you're none.

If you be one, as you are well expressed

By all external warrants, show it now

By putting on the destined livery.

(*Measure for Measure*; 2.4, 131-135)

She must not only give up her sacred virginity to him, in an act of coercive control and psychological abuse, but must consider it her "destined livery." Her place, in Angelo's eyes, is beneath him, literally and figuratively. She must submit to his aggression, or she is not a real woman; her brother shall be killed. Angelo then furthers the intensity and cruelty of the situation by reminding her, "Who will believe thee, Isabel?" (*Measure for Measure*; 2.4, 151). After all, he is a high-ranking official, and she is not only a woman, but a nobody. It is the typical, centuries-old arguments of "Who will believe you?" and "Boys will be boys;" modern parallels abound between Angelo and every known name accused of assault in the past few years.

Angelo is not the only male character outwardly supporting rape culture. The Duke is another who perpetuates the toxic idea. This is not overtly seen until the final scene of the play. Isabella and Mariana, Angelo's abandoned wife, confront the Duke, Escalus, and Angelo with the truth. Ultimately (and unfortunately), it is not the brave women who succeed in conquering Angelo. As Professor Morales reminds her readers, "Isabella and Mariana speak truth to power, but it is not their words that expose Angelo. Instead, it is the actions of the more powerful man, the Duke..." (Morales). It takes a man's voice for these women to be believed, and it is not the voice of a male ally. It is the voice of a man who sat back and watched, incognito, as sexual violence inundated his dukedom. He only steps in when he can appear to be the hero. The Duke is playing into the male domination/women submission concept, further

normalizing that only men can be the hero, only men can be believed. He has saved the damsel in distress, and, thus, is all the more powerful and loved.

Furthermore, the Duke makes a bold assumption when it comes to Isabella's emotion. After revealing that her brother is alive and pardoning Angelo, he says to her, "If he be like your brother, for his sake/Is he pardoned, and for your lovely sake/Give me your hand, and say you will be mine,/He is my brother too—but fitter time for that" (*Measure for Measure*; 5.1, 494-497). Shakespeare gives Isabella nothing in response; her silence speaks volumes. Similar to the state of Theseus and Hippolyta, the Duke has quieted a woman who the audience has seen to be courageous, clever, and bold. Though argumentation can be made as to what Isabella's true reaction is, one thing is clear: she, like Shakespeare's other comedic ladies, has found her way to the submissive role. The Duke has made himself triumph, painted himself as the hero instead of the powerful women of the story. He has tamed Isabella, who—dependent upon interpretation—will now give up her sought-after life of piety to become the Duke's wife. She is fully submitting to toxic masculinity.

Clearly, Shakespeare's plays, though brilliant, are problematic. However, in this modern era, Shakespeare's words are allowed to be interpreted differently, used as a guideline instead of a certainty: times change, after all, and the immortality of words allow them to change with it. Performances of both *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Measure for Measure* have changed significantly as time has passed, a tribute to the world's shifting viewpoints. In this modern society, there needs to be acknowledgement of the deeply imbedded rape culture and toxic masculinity within Shakespeare's plays, especially the aforementioned two. From there, performative choices can be made, educational tools can be formed, and Shakespeare's works can continue to be revolutionary centuries after he wrote them. After all, this world is still dealing with the same issues as Shakespeare's time. The effects of the development of rape culture and the perpetuation of toxic masculinity reverberate throughout humanity even today. Every human being could learn something by recognizing and studying these issues within *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Measure for Measure*, specifically, and Shakespearean literature, in general. After all, times change...and, with it, one shouldn't let history repeat itself.

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